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**WAR IN THE OLD TESTAMENT:  
A JOURNEY TOWARDS NONPARTICIPATION**

Terry L. Brensinger

In March of 1994, a 38 year-old physician named Baruch Goldstein strolled into the Mosque of Abraham in the West Bank town of Hebron and proceeded to massacre some 29 Palestinian worshippers. In the aftermath of this apparent atrocity, Israeli Prime Minister Rabin personally contacted his avowed enemy, PLO chairman Yasar Arafat, and confessed: "As an Israeli, I am ashamed of this deed."<sup>1</sup> Yet the atrocious character of Goldstein's deed was not so apparent to the militant Jewish settlers with whom he resided in Kiryat Arba, a small town situated just outside of Hebron. To them, Goldstein was nothing less than a hero of biblical proportions, for his annihilation of the Palestinians constituted a reenactment of Samson's warring exploits against the Philistines.

Before judging Goldstein and his fellow Jewish settlers too harshly, however, we at least need to be reminded that the Hebrew Scriptures have inspired the Christian Church throughout its history to engage in similar military adventures. In describing the capture of Jerusalem by the crusaders, for example, Raymond of Agiles wrote that

Some of our men (and this was more merciful) cut off the heads of their enemies; others shot them with arrows, so that they fell from the towers; others tortured them longer by casting them into the flames. Piles of heads, hands, and feet were to be seen in the streets of the city....Indeed, it was a just and splendid judgment of God, that this place should be filled with the blood of the unbelievers, when it

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<sup>1</sup>Russell Watson, "Massacre in a Mosque," *Newsweek* (March 7, 1994): 35.

had suffered so long from their blasphemies.<sup>2</sup>

He goes on to describe the mood of the crusaders upon arriving at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre:

Now that the city was taken it was worth all our previous labors and hardships to see the devotion of the pilgrims at the Holy Sepulchre. How they rejoiced and exulted and sang the ninth chant to the Lord.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout such crusading episodes, a favorite text of the participants was Jeremiah 48:10: "Cursed be he that keepeth back his sword from blood."<sup>4</sup>

More recently, the Puritans at times saw their conflict with the "Aboriginal natives" here on American soil in similar terms. In 1704, for example, Herbert Gibbs preached a sermon following Puritan advances, and in it he joyfully acknowledged "the mercies of God in extirpating the enemies of Israel in Canaan".<sup>5</sup> Still later, World War II General Montgomery prayed "that the Lord mighty in battle will go forth with our armies, and that his special providence will aid us in the struggle".<sup>6</sup> Just a few years ago, a student in one of my seminars casually but seriously remarked: "If killing was good enough for Joshua, then its good enough for me!"

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<sup>2</sup>Roland Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace* (Nashville, 1960), pp. 112-13.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>6</sup>Peter Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1978), p. 33.

For most of us, such blatant applications of Old Testament passages concerning war immediately strike a raw nerve. Yet the issue remains: What is a Christian, distanced from the Old Testament by both culture and further revelation, to do with these texts? People who accept the justification of war, at least under certain circumstances, often use them to add validity to their claims. Those from peace traditions tend, with exceptions, to assign them to a pre-New Testament period, a period since surpassed by the teachings of Jesus. Is there, however, another alternative?

In seeking such an alternative, it must be stated up front that the Old Testament is clearly not a pacifistic document. On the contrary, wars abound in the traditions of ancient Israel, often in graphic and seemingly barbarous forms. At issue, however, is whether the Old Testament consistently accepts war as an inevitable and at times appropriate human activity, or whether it seeks instead to transform and even abolish it (much as it does, in the minds of many readers at least, with such matters as slavery, polygamy, and the roles of women). Can we find emerging from the pages of the Old Testament what Susan Niditch refers to as an "Ideology of Nonparticipation?"<sup>7</sup> In order to address this question, three general issues will be discussed: reducing the troops; controlling the king; and imagining the unimaginable.

<sup>7</sup>Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible* (New York, 1993), p. 134.

## REDUCING THE TROOPS

Wars, once again, are extremely common in the Old Testament, as they are in texts throughout the ancient Near East. War, in other words, was a standard part of the landscape. What requires our attention, then, is the manner in which Israel and her neighbors portrayed their wars.

To begin with, the writers of Scripture seek to present the various wars in which Israel engaged as divinely ordained campaigns. According to this prevalent trajectory, Israel's wars were in fact a primary means through which God judged the sinful nations of the world. Accordingly, such war narratives have more in common with the biblical account depicting the divine destruction of Sodom and Gemorrah than they do with contemporary conflicts between warring nations. Rather than simply portraying adversarial nations defending or expanding their borders, the war stories of the Old Testament reveal God distributing his justice through human instruments. In short, God instructs Israel when and where to fight. Wars initiated by and for Israel herself are doomed to fail.

Beyond this, Israel's military victories were divinely propelled. In other words, the narratives consistently attribute Israel's victories to divine intervention. God sends the plagues upon the Egyptians (Exod. 7-12). God destroys the walls of Jericho (Josh. 6:20). God causes the sun to stand still during Israel's fight against the Amorites (Josh. 10:12-13). God sends rain in order to stymie the Canaanite coalition (Judg. 5). God

confuses the bewildered Midianites (Judges 7). God blinds the Arameans (2 Kgs. 6:18). God strikes the blood-thirsty Assyrians (2 Kgs. 19:35-37). God ambushes the invaders from the east (2 Chron. 20). Again and again, God manipulates the forces of history and nature and victoriously intervenes on Israel's behalf.

Importantly, then, the writers of the Old Testament invite us to see Israel's wars as divinely inspired and divinely propelled confrontations in which God accomplishes his purposes. Interestingly enough, such a conception is essentially how Israel's neighbors viewed war as well. Continually, the records from Egypt, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Syro-Palestine reveal the widespread conviction that the gods of these people also fight in battle. They too ordain military conflict, and they too intervene in order to assure victory. Consider just a few examples in which the gods miraculously intervene on behalf of their subjects:

#### A. Hittite texts

##### 1. Report from the reign of Mursilis II

But as I marched, as I reached there to the mountain of Lagasa,  
there the proud Weather-god, my lord, showed his divine power,  
and he attached a thunderbolt there. And my army saw the thunderbolt,  
the land of Arzawa also saw it, and the thunderbolt went forth there,  
and struck the land of Arzawa, it also struck the Lhhaluis city of Apasa. (KBo III 4 II 15-19)<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>A. Goetze, *Die Annalen des Mursilis* (Leipzig, 1933), pp. 46-47.

##### 2. Report from Mursilis II, who was in pursuit of Sunupassaer

The proud Weather-god, my lord, stood beside me.  
It rained all night so that the enemy could not see the campfire of the troops.  
But as soon as the weather became clear in the early evening,  
the proud Weather-god suddenly raised the storm and brought it and it went before my troops,  
making them invisible to the enemy.  
So I arrived at the land of Malazzia and burnt and destroyed it utterly. (KUB XIV 20 11-22)<sup>9</sup>

#### B. Egyptian Texts

##### 1. From Rameses II during a Syrian campaign in bad weather

His majesty considered, and took counsel with his heart: How will it be with those whom I have sent out, who have gone on a mission to Syria, in these days of rain and snow which fall in winter. Then he made a great offering to his father Seth, and with it pronounced the following prayer: Heaven rests upon your hands; the earth is under your feet. What you command, takes place. [May you cause] the rain, the cold wind and the snow [to cease] until the marvel you design for me shall have reached me. Then his father Seth heard all that he had said. The sky became peaceful and summer-like days began. (Aub. Simbel 1:36:39)<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, the war narratives of the Old Testament and those of Israel's neighbors have a great deal in common.

What appears to be lacking in the ancient Near Eastern accounts, however, is the strong emphasis that the Old Testament places upon the theme of God warring on behalf of a weak and perpetually overmatched group of people. We find, for example, Deborah and Barak encountering the chariot-possessing Canaanites, Gideon the camel-riding Midianites, and David the awe-inspiring Goliath. Likewise, the Chronicler repeatedly calls attention to

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 194-95.

<sup>10</sup>H. T. Veld, *Seth, God of Confusion* (Leiden, 1977), p. 133.

the weaknesses of those whom Yahweh assists (2 Chron. 14:9-15; 16:8; 20:12). "O our God," Jehoshaphat cries,

will you not execute judgment upon them (invaders from the east)? For we are powerless against this great multitude that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you. (20:12).

In each instance, the Israelites are woefully underequipped-- torches, trumpets, pottery, slings, or nothing at all. Why, David can apparently turn completely around in Saul's armor, without moving it!

Significantly, this theme of God warring on behalf of the weak is so prevalent in the Old Testament that, in a few instances when Israel's own resources might lead them to believe that they could win the battle on their own, an act of reduction occurs. As a result, Gideon confronts the innumerable Midianites with but a fraction of his original forces (Judges 7), and Amaziah is left to face the Edomites without the aid of the Ephraimites (2 Chron. 25:5-7). To make matters even worse, the troops left for Gideon to employ are the least competent of those originally summoned. Unmistakably, only Yahweh deserves the credit for Israel's military victories.

The war narratives of the Old Testament, then, resemble those of Israel's neighbors in several crucial respects. God directs the fighting, and it is he who intervenes in battle. However, unlike the accounts from the surrounding nations, Israel's texts place particular attention on the weaknesses of the people and their occasional need for reduction. That such a theme occurs at all is noteworthy. That it occurs with respect

to a group of people who find themselves in what is perhaps the most war-torn region of the world is potentially profound.

Rather than celebrating their own military accomplishments, the Israelites are instructed to wait and view Yahweh alone as their protector and deliverer. While this undoubtedly tells us something about God, it likewise reveals something about the way his people are to function within the world.

#### CONTROLLING THE KING

With a good number of the war narratives canonically situated prior to Israel's request for a king in 1 Samuel 8, it is apparent that such a request places Israel's position as Yahweh's uniquely chosen people in jeopardy. Kings, after all, typically become self-serving, consolidating within their grasp all power and authority. This tendency, observable throughout the ancient Near East, lies behind the list of warnings that follow Israel's request. In reality, a king will institute a military draft, force the Israelites to work against their will, confiscate property, and impose burdensome taxes (1 Sam. 8:11-17). Kings, in other words, will not be what Israel anticipates.

In order to prevent the actualization of these self-serving tendencies, kingship in Israel is uniquely situated within a set of theological parameters. According to Deuteronomy 17, Israel's kings were to avoid three practices so characteristic of monarchy elsewhere:

1. They should not amass many horses, the attaining of which

would signify military security.

2. They should not acquire many wives, a reference most likely to the marrying of foreign women in order to formalize international alliances. Such an act would symbolize political security.

3. They should not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold, the gaining of which would constitute financial security. Israel's kings, as such, were to redirect their energies in entirely new directions. And what were they to do? Sit on the throne and study Torah day after day! As Walter Brueggemann describes it:

The biblical tradition and Israel in her reflection on monarchy are peculiar in affirming that the fundamental religio-political reality is not king but Torah, not human distribution of power, but divine vision for society.<sup>11</sup>

This is, needless to say, a scandalous redefinition of power and monarchy. As Herbert Huffmon casually comments, the gods of the ancient Near East "but into the affairs of earthly kings in order to oversee their activities, but to so limit kingly responsibilities is unusual indeed."<sup>12</sup>

Given these theological parameters, it is significant to note that two of the three relate directly to warfare. The prohibition against amassing horses is self-evident--Israel is not to base either her identity or security on military might.

<sup>11</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision* (Philadelphia, 1976), p. 92.

<sup>12</sup>Telephone conversation with Herbert Huffmon, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey, September, 1995.

However, the prohibition against marrying many wives and thereby ratifying alliances also relates to warfare because it deliberately limits Israel's military maneuverability during moments of crisis. In the same way that the ruling nations of the ancient Near East stipulate that their vassals not enter into agreements with competing forces, so too are the Israelites bound by treaty to Yahweh alone. They were not to rely on anything or anyone else. In *The Mighty from Their Thrones: Power in the Biblical Tradition*, J.P.M. Walsh captures this same idea:

The tradition insists on this: Yahweh wars on behalf of Israel. But what is Israel to do? The tradition is clear on this, too: 'Be still' (Exod. 14:13-14). If Israel relied on military might they would be arrogating *mispāt* ("having the say") to themselves and rejecting the *sedeq* ("sense of rightness") of Yahweh. They would be living by the same sense of *sedeq* that caused the kings to amass armies and multiply horses and chariots: of *sedeq* rising, and validating, obsession with security and freedom from risk. For Israel to rely on power and strategy would mean rebellion against Yahweh.<sup>13</sup>

Importantly, however, these theological parameters rarely prevented the type of self-serving tendencies so prevalent among kings elsewhere. As a result, the Old Testament repeatedly levels criticism against a vast array of violators. Within the so-called Deuteronomistic History, David himself, the paradigmatic king, is harshly rebuked for counting his fighting men (2 Sam. 24). Apparently, the taking of such a census is analagous to an aging person fretfully anticipating retirement, only to discover that a larger-than-expected return on an

<sup>13</sup>J.P.M. Walsh, S.J., *The Mighty from Their Thrones: Power in the Biblical Tradition* (Philadelphia, 1987), p. 68.

investment makes anxiety, and faith, unnecessary. David's troops, not God, ensure the quality of his advancing years. Similarly, the historian attributes the decline of Solomon's seemingly glorious reign to his blatant disregard of all three of these parameters (1 Kings 10:26-29; 11:1-13). While it is true, as M. H. Segal points out, that Solomon receives direct criticism only for his innumerable marriages to foreign women, the clear connections with Deuteronomy 17 make explicit editorial comment unnecessary.<sup>14</sup> Solomon self-destructed by absolutizing himself.

In the prophetic literature, related pronouncements appear with some regularity. Consider these:

Their land is filled with silver and gold,  
and there is no end to their treasures;  
their land is filled with horses,  
and there is no end to their chariots.  
Their land is filled with idols;  
they bow down to the work of their hands,  
to what their own fingers have made.  
(Isaiah 2:7-8)

For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel:  
In returning and rest you shall be saved;  
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.  
But you refused and said, 'No! We will flee upon horses'--  
therefore you shall flee!  
and, 'We will ride upon swift steeds'--  
therefore your pursuers shall be swift.  
(Isaiah 30:15-16)

Because you have trusted in your power  
and in the multitude of your warriors,  
therefore the tumult of war shall rise against your people,  
and all your fortresses shall be destroyed,...  
(Hosea 10:13-14)

In that day, says the Lord,  
I will cut off your horses from among you

<sup>14</sup>M.H. Segal, *The Pentateuch: Its Composition and Authorship and Other Biblical Studies* (Jerusalem, 1967), p. 79.

and will destroy your chariots;...  
(Micah 5:10-13)

In each of these and other passages, Israel and Judah defy the principles embodied in Deuteronomy 17 and trust instead in horses and chariots. Significantly, such behavior is included in lists that also mention sorcery and idolatry in its various forms (Micah 5:12-15).

Similar texts could be cited in which the establishing of treaties with foreign nations receives prophetic condemnation (Isa. 31:1; Jer. 2:36; 37:7-8; Hos. 5:13; 6:11; 8:9; 12:1).

Isaiah 30:1-3 serves as an example:

Oh, rebellious children, says the Lord,  
who carry out a plan, but not mine;  
who make an alliance, but against my will,  
adding sin to sin;  
who set out to go down to Egypt  
without asking for my counsel,  
to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh,  
and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt;  
Therefore the protection of Pharaoh shall become  
your shame,  
and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt your humiliation.

In such instances, military alliances constitute a violation of Israel's covenantal identity, a deplorable compromise of their calling to "be still."

While it is true, as some have argued, that such passages criticize the misplacing of one's confidence in military might and alliances rather than war itself, the point remains that Israel testifies to a rather peculiar notion of monarchy and its employment of power. Once again, while this unmistakably tells us something about God, it surely implies something about the intended character of Israel in the world. As Willard Swartley



suggests,

The pervasive prophetic criticism of kingship with its military power indicates that the Old Testament points to another way, the establishment of justice through the Torah and the way of the suffering servant, which refuses and judges the military war.<sup>15</sup>

#### IMAGINING THE UNIMAGINABLE

In spite of the attempts to reduce the troops and control the king, the Old Testament bears witness to Israel's increasing propensity to fend for herself. In the process, the king, whose task was to promote peace and justice, became instead the author of chaos. Such chaos brought with it a continuing prophetic critique as well as a deepening conviction that the same God who freed Israel from Egypt would at some point free her from the monarchical abyss into which she had fallen. Yahweh would raise up someone who would succeed where previous kings had failed.

What gradually emerges, then, is a prophetic vision of a righteous kingdom ruled by a righteous king. For Isaiah, such a kingdom is characterized by endless peace, justice, and righteousness (9:6-7). Micah envisions hope for the weak and marginalized (4:6-13). Jeremiah speaks in terms of safety; people actually living with genuine security and confidence (23:5-8). In each instance, this quality of life will be guaranteed by an anticipated ruler sitting upon the throne of David.

<sup>15</sup>Willard Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women* (Scottdale, 1983), p. 116.

Perhaps the most remarkable description of this longed-for kingdom appears in Isaiah 11:1-9. Seemingly grasping for appropriate metaphors, the prophet stretches language to the limits in portraying things to come:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand  
on the adder's den.  
They will not hurt or destroy on my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the  
Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Everything has been turned upside down, and the unthinkable becomes commonplace.

Eventually, however, the disappointment of exile and the apparent fragmentation after the return no doubt caused considerable pause. Yet the imaginative glimpse lived on in apocalyptic depictions of things still to come. In Zechariah 9:9-10, for example, the anticipated king triumphantly enters Zion. Unlike earlier passages, which consciously associated the coming king with David, this ruler is, if you will, decidedly unlike David in certain respects. The king of Zechariah 9 lacks military might, and the horses and chariots of Solomon have given way to a colt. This king, so it appears, has intentionally disarmed. Upon his arrival, his kingdom will similarly disarm:

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim  
and the war horse from Jerusalem;  
and the battle bow shall be cut off,  
and he shall command peace to the nations;

his dominion shall be from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

In place of monarchical chaos, peace will carry the day.

Importantly, while many of these passages envisioning a peaceful kingdom focus specifically on Israel, various texts clearly present a glimpse of future peace in which the surrounding nations are also direct participants and benefactors. In Isaiah 19:18-24, for example, Israel and her longtime foes, Egypt and Assyria, share equally in divine blessing. Likewise in both Isaiah 2:1-4 and its parallel in Micah 4:1-3, the nations of the world mutually participate in the actualization of God's righteous kingdom. At that time, God will judge fairly between all people, and all will walk together in the ways of the Lord. Among other things,

they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more.  
(Isa. 2:4)

Suggestively, the journey from reducing the troops and controlling the king leads eventually to disarming the nations. In Isaiah's mind at least, such a journey would progress far more smoothly and quickly if Israel would herself begin to enact the vision, for he concludes his oracle with a striking exhortation:

O house of Jacob,  
come, let us walk  
in the light of the Lord!

Rather than constituting a "mere" eschatological hope, beating swords into plowshares serves here as a daring appeal for God's people to enact that longed-for age of peace within the present

world.

#### ISSUES FOR REFLECTION

The Old Testament, without argument, does not portray a pacifistic community. War predominates throughout the ancient Near East, and Israel clearly participates. Yet, the nature of the materials indicates that "something is in the works." By suggesting both an outrageous understanding of power and might as well as depicting an imaginative alternative of peace, the Old Testament does indeed bear witness to an emerging ideology of nonparticipation. From this, several implications can be drawn:

1. The life and ministry of Jesus, which for many serves as a paradigm of non-violence, need not be viewed as an absolute break from the seemingly militant orientation of the Old Testament. At the same time, neither must the Old Testament be considered an embarrassment for those who seek to embrace a theology of peace. While the Old Testament does not present a crystalized view of pacifism per se, it does present what Niditch refers to as an "extended and self-consciously critical treatment of warring behavior."<sup>16</sup> This treatment, in combination with a prophetic and apocalyptic vision of peace, provide the soil for a more developed theology of pacifism based upon the New Testament.
2. That the Old Testament does in fact give witness to a non-violent alternative should come as no surprise to us in so far as Jesus himself expressed dismay over the failure of his fellow

<sup>16</sup>Niditch, p. 138.

Jews to receive him. This rejection, so most commentators suggest, resulted from a Jewish expectation for a politically-oriented Messiah who would forcibly free his people from Roman oppression. Furthermore, such an expectation must have arisen from an Old Testament context which predicted the violent overthrow of Israel's enemies.

The alternative question, however, focuses on the fact that Jesus apparently expressed surprise at being rejected. Why would he be so surprised if the Jews had no theological framework with which to recognize him? Indeed, the fact that recognition was deemed possible suggests an emerging view within the Old Testament of a king who would turn power and violence on its head.

3. Finally, one striking issue remains: What does all of this mean for the contemporary Christian Church? To begin with, it is essential to affirm that the Church, not the United States nor any other nation, inherits the mantle of modeling the kingdom of God within the world. It is the Church, therefore, that must reduce its power-oriented equipment, control its aspiring kings, and present to a warring world an imaginative alternative to violence, manipulation, and coercion. Doing so will involve at least these three things:

a. Serving as a prophetic-consciousness within the world, a consciousness that criticizes warring behaviors and challenges the violent policies that our respective nations so often embrace.

b. Promoting peace, both by articulating insightful alternatives to war as well as by actively supporting and engaging in non-violent ministries, even in the most war-torn areas of the world.

c. Modelling peace within the church itself, a peace that infiltrates every level of our proceedings and all of our relationships. A church at war with itself, as at times seems to be the case, has little to say to a warring world.

In reflecting upon Isaiah 11:6-8, Walter Brueggemann suggests that the images there are unheard of and abnormal; wolves do not live with lambs, cows do not graze with bears, and children do not play with poisonous snakes. "But then I look again," Brueggemann continues,

and notice something else. The poet means to say that in the new age, these are normal things. And the effect of the poem is to expose the real abnormalities of life, which we have taken for granted. We have lived with things abnormal so long that we have gotten used to them and we think they are normal.<sup>17</sup>

Violence is a part of life, so everyone around us says. War is inevitable. Killing is everywhere. The abnormalities of violence and war, so drastically opposed to life as God intended it, have become so "normal" that the world cannot imagine anything else. The world cries out for alternatives. The world needs an imagination. Therein lies a portion of our task.

Yet this is precisely where the Church has often failed to leave its mark. Rather than decrying the evils of war, we seek

<sup>17</sup>Brueggemann, pp. 44-45.

to justify it. Rather than imaginatively and creatively exploring the possibilities of promoting peace, we settle for common realism and cope with what we presently have. Rather than providing a drastically different alternative that at least gives onlookers the opportunity to say, "There is a better way," we model more of what the world already sees in itself. A theology of peace, the groundwork for which has been laid in the Old Testament, is frighteningly abnormal. Without an imagination.